# Review: Sarah Cooper (2013) *The Soul of Film Theory*, London: Palgrave. 224 pp.

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Sarah Cooper's book is a meticulously researched history of the term 'soul' as used in film theory since its inception. The book traces the term's curious history, and its insistent recurrence despite occasional complete vanishings. Apart from the introduction and concluding remarks, Cooper's book consists of three large chapters that describe in chronological order the history of the notion of the 'soul' in film theory: 'Classical Souls' (23-67), 'Signifying Souls' (68-107) and 'Body and Soul' (108-151). It becomes very clear that Cooper is dealing here with a massive amount of literature, in part forgotten now, but which she patiently uncovers. As such, it is an important and impressive piece of work, which ought to feature in any serious theoretical Film Studies programme, notwithstanding some of my reservations about it, which I shall present below.

In the Introduction (1-22) Cooper offers some definitions of the term 'soul', mentioning that it has its roots in the Old English and Old High German words 'sawol', 'seel' and 'seol', which were used to translate the Greek term *ψυχή*/'psyche' and the Latin term 'anima' (5). She mentions how 'psyche' is also linked to *ψύχειν*/'psychein', which means to blow and to breathe, a connotation that is still present in some languages, including Slavonic ones (although Cooper does not mention this). She goes on to present different takes on 'the soul', mostly 'idealist, spiritualist or psychological' in order to highlight 'film theory's interest in thinking that has led to a privileging of mind' in the first instance – in stark contrast to much contemporary film theory, which privileges the body (7). Cooper briefly mentions Platonic (8-10) and Cartesian (10-11) notions of the soul, as well as more recent philosophical theorisations pertinent to her examination, in particular those of Emmanuel Lévinas and Henri Bergson.

Strikingly, however, Cooper does not interrogate the notion of the soul and its different meanings as perceived in Judeo-Christian traditions. There is namely a key difference in the understanding of the soul in the Roman Catholic and Jewish paradigms versus the protestant ones: the former offer a mysterious and mystical view of the unknowable core of who we are, while the latter supply a more mundane and strictly religious view of the innate goodness of a person, which can be either preserved for eternity or, through a sinful existence, condemned forever with no possibility of redemption. I would argue that such an interrogation might lead her to a re-thinking of the

Freudian notion of the unconscious in connection with the notion of the soul, a matter to which I shall return briefly below.

In the first chapter, 'Classical Souls', Cooper engages with the post-First World War fascination with Spiritualism and psychical research, foregrounding the work of Hugo Münsterberg, author of the important *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). Cooper focuses on Münsterberg's earlier and less well known work on Spiritualism, arguing that it will in some respects have informed *The Photoplay* – unconsciously perhaps, although Cooper does not use that term. Münsterberg in his work as a psychologist was instrumental in exposing as fraudulent the work of spiritual media, in particular Eusapia Palladino (29). Meanwhile, Cooper sees Münsterberg's later work as the struggle of a positivist scientist trying to reconcile the spiritualists' ideas on the afterlife with his own. Cooper points to Münsterberg's focus in his essay 'The Return of the Soul' (1915) on 'seeking meaning rather than just cause-and-effect logic', suggesting that this mirrors *The Photoplay*'s emphasis on the spectator also finding meaning rather than just intellectual stimulation or entertainment (35). It is the notion that the soul of the film is something that gives it its very *raison d'être* that is important to Münsterberg. Cooper stresses Münsterberg's desire to bring into his discussions the entirety of the 'inner life' of the spectator, not just easily discernible conscious emotions. Again, it is here that Cooper might have explored links to psychoanalytical thinking, for while Münsterberg does not mention psychoanalysis directly in his book, we know that he was aware of psychoanalysis and that he in some ways engaged in a robust dialogue with it (see for example Bjork, 1983: 63-64).

Cooper then in the same chapter traces the progression of the French impressionist filmmakers who used the term 'soul' (*âme*) interchangeably with the spirit (*esprit*), again in attempting to denote a film's deeper meaning, which is not easily describable. The work of Béla Balázs, who focused on physiognomy in his search for a clearer way of finding what soul 'is', was fuelled by the belief that a person's body might convey the hidden better than words ever could (58).

The second chapter considers the work of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as that of phenomenological film theorists Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel. The latter significantly expressed a desire in 1952 for the cinema to offer 'a form of spiritual nourishment', before later asking in a meditative fashion 'does the cinema have a soul?' (*âme*, not *esprit*) (74). The chapter then discusses André Bazin and Edgar Morin, partially ignoring the former's huge debt to psychoanalysis, before moving on to the psychoanalytically-fuelled film theory that emerged after 1968, in particular that of Christian Metz, in whose work the notion of 'the soul' is remarkably absent. At the end of the

chapter, Cooper introduces Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1986), a text informed by psychoanalysis and which reclaims the place of the black person's voice, with Cooper mentioning in passing the importance of the term 'soul' to black culture (106).

The third and final chapter incorporates both some of the most accomplished and also some of the more problematic ideas in the book. For example, its analysis of Gilles Deleuze's omission of the Bergsonian notion of the soul is one of the finest and most illuminating in the book, not just because of Cooper's reclaiming of Bergsonian thought in its own right rather than only through the lens of Deleuze, but also because it offers a case study of how the history of ideas can be impacted by individual thinkers' predilections for and/or interests in a particular way of thinking. It becomes clear that Bergson, who incidentally was also quite influential on the work of Jacques Lacan, was not only 'interested' in the notion of the soul and how it might link to cinema, but really worked through his various changing ideas of a relationship between a notion of the soul as the expression of the *mystical* in contrast to the *religious* notion of the soul.

Furthermore, Cooper's interrogation of Vivian Sobchack's omission of 'the soul' in her work as influenced by Merleau-Ponty is deeply illuminating: we must not forget that the position from which a scholar speaks is of crucial importance. That said, the turn against psychoanalytically-informed, structuralism-based film theory has not to my mind been interrogated quite deeply enough in this volume. There were, for example, a number of historical circumstances that prompted Deleuze in his work with psychoanalyst Félix Guattari directly to attack psychoanalysis, which at the time was embodied by Lacan, a thinker who was particularly annoying to Deleuze, both on intellectual and on personal grounds (see Roudinesco 1999: 347). Similarly, the subsequent move by Sobchack and other mostly female and feminist film theorists, including Cooper, who have reclaimed the importance of subjective bodily experience in the move away from language, is as a result of this oversight presented almost as a natural progression, rather than as an historically and politically determined gesture.

Not surprisingly, Cooper gives the shortest shrift to psychoanalysis. The extraordinary story of James Strachey's mis-translation of the German word 'Seele' (which means 'soul' or 'psyche') in the work of Sigmund Freud is mentioned only briefly via the work of Bruno Bettelheim (12). And yet the notion of the unconscious being in some way the psyche's, or soul's, unknowable core, a core that also animates the body, is crucial to psychoanalysis – indeed, far more crucial than various other notions reformulated in sometimes productive and sometimes confused ways by Freud's intellectual heirs. As Cooper mentions, Jean-Luc Nancy has picked up on this, even going so far as to say that 'what is meant by the word

"unconscious" is not a folding of the soul: it is the soul itself, or if you prefer, it is man' (12). But while Cooper quotes Nancy, she does not further interrogate the connection that he makes between 'the unconscious' and the notion of the soul. Surely this would have been a crucial link further to explore in the history of the soul in film theory.

*The Soul of Film Theory* is an invaluable volume for film theorists and students of film studies alike, although perhaps a more appropriate title would have been 'the soul *in* film theory', for Cooper's stated objective is to offer a linear narrative of the use of the word 'soul' in film theory rather than to advance a theory of her own regarding the soul of film. This possible weakness, if one could see it as such, is also the book's greatest merit as it invites readers to continue their own further interrogations into the notion of the soul, or the space of the unknowable in one's perception of any film.

**Bibliography**


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